

120 Years Later: A Look at the State of Zionism and the American Jewish Community

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One hundred and twenty years since the most radical transformation of post-biblical Jewish life, the two predominate centers of Judaism face a fork in the road. The American Jewish secular community is rapidly losing the “glues” that held it together and now faces an unprecedented survival challenge. Meanwhile, Israel - founded as the Jewish State - is under mounting threat of losing its own Jewish identity.

This paper seeks to serve as basis for discussion, a platform from which issues and questions can be debated and developed. Views expressed are those of the authors and not of the AIFL.

Threat to the Secular American Jewish Community

The main Jewish immigration into the United States began to take shape about 120 years ago. Over 90% of American Jews came to the United States after 1890.

Upon arrival, most of them were religious, spoke Yiddish, and worked in a profession or occupation regarded as “Jewish.” As a result, many Jews today aged 40 and over have known a grandparent who had such Jewish characteristics.

Today, however, the majority of American Jews are younger than the age of 40. For most of them, the shtetl, Yiddish and the Holocaust are primarily known from movies, textbooks and indirect accounts. In addition, the old binding force of religion has lessened. Surveys indicate that 84 per cent of American Jews do not regularly attend synagogue, 85 per cent do not keep kosher, and half do not marry a Jewish spouse.

The life of the young secular American Jew is culturally similar to the American non-Jew, as manifested in social networks, circle of friends, and culture. He or she is not so much a Jew who happens to live in America as an American who happens to be Jewish. Moreover, traditional lines between what were regarded as Jewish and non-Jewish professions and firms are now significantly diminished.

The bonding through some form of Jewish affiliation, such as membership in a Jewish organization, has survived, but such affiliation is not necessarily a key factor in Jewish priorities. Membership is easy and non-exclusive. The secular Jew is also often a member of a social or country club, alumni association, and professional association. Somewhere in this hierarchy of priorities the secular Jew may also be a member of a synagogue.

Rabbi David Posner of Temple Emmanuel, American's flagship Reform congregation, underscores the above transformation when asked why do his congregates come to synagogue

once a year on the holiday of Yom Kipur: “The reason they are coming is to hear what I have to say. I talk about religion, about Philosophy. It is a radically different experience from what they do everyday.”

Just like with other immigrant groups, affiliation out-survives a distinct community and not necessarily indicative of the centrality of the connection.

Historical Glues Holding the Jewish Community Together

The Jews through the first 1,800 years of exile were bonded together primarily by religion. Splinter groups throughout history that abandoned religion have vanished.

A second commonality has been discrimination against the Jews, which has been prevalent throughout their history. Assimilation, for the most part, was simply not an option. One could even argue that anti-Semitism was a primary enabler of Jewish survival.

In the 19th century, secularization, emancipation and mass migration changed these two things and weakened the connection between Jews. But two defining events in the 20th century tended to unite the Jews. One came in the form of the tragedy that defined Judaism: the Holocaust, in which all streams of Judaism were lumped together into a systematic campaign of genocide. The other came in the form of revival: Zionism gained steam, and Jews came together to support the Jewish State.

Suddenly, a growing group of Jews start defining themselves in terms of Israel, rather than religion. Furthermore, consistent with the time's revolutionary philosophies, the Zionist leaders sought to create a “New Jew”: A fighter and pioneer that would have no resemblance to the “Old Jew,” who was poor, weak, miserable, and victimized.

Replacement American Glue

In the 1920's, as the Jews in Israel reinvigorated Judaism, the majority of American Jews were living in the “ghetto” and spoke Yiddish as their primary language. 60% of them were born outside the US.

Yet as the 20th Century progressed, many American Jews rapidly left the ghetto life behind them and became successful: Entrepreneurs turned family businesses into national enterprises, assimilated into social and cultural life, and pursued the American Dream. Some retained their religious way of life; others who became secular remained involved in the Jewish community through a variety of Jewish social, political, and philanthropic bodies.

The exit from the restraints of the ghetto is no doubt a great American story, a great Jewish Story. But it came at a price: the abandonment of the Jewish glues, those stayed behind in the ghetto.

To address the void created by increased secularization, the absence of discrimination and fading Jewish culture, the American Jews over the last 60 years connected through two new substitute glues:

1. Memory of the Holocaust: The Holocaust is most significant “Jewish issue” that united the Jews in the second half of the 20th century and continues to unite Jews today. The Holocaust, its lessons and memories, drive Jewish organizational policy and dominate the community ethos. The most Jewish topic depicted by Hollywood is the Holocaust (there are more movies about the Holocaust than about all other Jewish issues combined). And the most common theme of Jewish museums is the Holocaust.

2. Nostalgia for Ashkenazi/Eastern European roots: The second American Jewish glue was the culture of Yiddish, the shtetl and gefilte fish. With the “grandmothers generation” alive, the American Jews united around the cultural symbols of their previous point of domicile.

Unsurprisingly, the American Jew looks at its ancestral “Old Jew” through a lens similar to that of the American Italian who looks at its ancestral Italians or the American Irish who looks at those from Ireland: In terms of home-country, in terms of “where we came from”. With Nostalgia and even pride.

There was never a divorce from the past. While an early theme of the Israeli Jewish immigrant was “Negation of the Diaspora,” the American Jewish immigrant “Embraced the Diaspora.” While the Israeli Jews rebelled and created a “New Jew,” the American Jews brought the shtetl with them to the Lower East Side.

The Drying Up of the American Glue

The good news for the American Jewish secular community is that in the last 60 years, The memory of the Holocaust and the nostalgia to Eastern European roots successfully replaced the fading glues of religion and discrimination.

The bad news is that in the next few decades, these glues will inevitably fade: the memories of the Holocaust will not be as acute when the survivors die out; and nostalgia for the old Jewish life will diminish once the Jewish “grandmothers” will pass away (and will take their associated Yiddish/shtetl/gefilte fish culture with them).

As of today, there are no substitutes for these glues, and therefore a large vacuum is expected to emerge – one which represents an existential threat for the secular American Jewish community.

With all of this, two options are possible: Either the vacuum will immediately be replaced by a new glue, or the secular Jewish community will dissolve within a few decades.

Rabbi Posner does not know what that new glue is, but is confident it would be found: “I have nothing but optimism and a very rosy outlook. That is because God always takes care of us. There is a special mysterious plan. The American Jews will prevail because God will make us prevail.”

Israel's Jewish Debate

The State of Israel, founded on the Zionist ideology of creating a homeland for the Jewish people, exists today as it has for the past 64 years as an implementation of that ideology.

This very notion is now being challenged through a latent cold battle of narratives that is taking shape within Israel: Is Israel still the homeland for the Jewish people or is Israel home for the Israelis.

The incumbent narrative is of Israel as homeland for the Jewish People. After all, there were no “Israelis” 120 years ago. The population that was transplanted to Israel were Jews reestablishing their homeland.

The competing narrative would argue that while it is true that the Israelis came from the Jews, they have now established a new, distinct culture and their Jewish connection is primarily historical. Israel today, according to such narrative, is simply like any country in the world, a homeland for its citizens rather than a group of people united by religion. (Citizens can be Jews or Arabs, religious or secular, but certainly not those living outside Israel or those who wish to immigrate from the Diaspora).

This debate reflects social and cultural movements within Israeli society that is being argued in multiple and expanding arenas. The ramifications of such change are immense, likely resulting in both a tangible schism between Israelis and Jews outside of Israel, as well as threatening the basic Zionist being.

Israel today is an energetic society. Smaller than New Jersey, it is a high-tech superpower (more Israeli companies trade on the NASDAQ than any other country other than US and Canada), as well as a center for art, culture, tourism, and producer of more Nobel laureates per capita than any other nation.

Israel is also home to the Israelis, 7 million people who live a dynamic and vibrant life, exercising creativity, embroiled in fierce debate and dedicated to their community, family and country.

But who are these Israelis? In the first two decades of its existence the majority of Israel's citizens were born outside of Israel and prior to the establishment of the country, but by today,

88% of Israelis were born after Israel was founded. This “silver platter” generation is for the first time in control of Israel's centers of power. (Benjamin Netanyahu is the first prime minister born after 1948).

From Diaspora Roots to Israelis

The idea of Israel was dreamed up and crafted almost entirely in and by the Diaspora: Jews in the Diaspora created the idea of Zionism - not the Jews living in Palestine - and Diaspora Jews developed it, advocated for it diplomatically and financed it (Herzl was in Israel only once). The Diaspora Jews were the source of people who returned to their ancestral homeland to build and fight for the establishment of the country.

Following the 1948 founding of the country, waves of Jewish immigration arrived, primarily from Europe and North Africa/Middle East. The rapid multiculturalism of the time was united by one thing only: Judaism. There was no other reason for a Moroccan, European refugee or Russian farmer to move to Israel except for one thing: Israel was the new homeland of the Jewish People.

Sixty years later, however, this has changed. Chen Liberman, an Israeli-born, US-educated reporter for Israeli Entertainment TV explains how she identifies with Judaism: “My Judaism is coincidental. It is not my primary title for self-definition. I'm part of that group by default and therefore I do observe major traditional events such as Passover dinner.”

It became apparent that for some in this new generation of Israelis, religious background is no longer providing the foundation of their self-identification. At best, a secondary identity value. Similarly, it is increasingly evident that there is a growing rift between the interest and identity factors of Israelis and those of the Diaspora Jews. A few notable issues have emerged over the last few years. They include Israel's rejection of non-orthodox Judaism (which as mentioned above, accounts for vast majority of American Jews), and the populist wave of criticism against foreign owners of apartments in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem (resulting in Jerusalem mayor sending a letter to those owners urging them to rent out their luxury vacation homes to students – a letter that was viewed as coming from “Big Brother” and offensive by many of the Diaspora Jewish homeowners). Israeli popular culture, often mocks American Jews as too religious and naive, and when posed with such question, many young Israelis answer that they feel stronger identity and closeness to an Israeli Arab than to an American Jew.

Just as the America-Jew assimilates to the dominant American culture, so does the Israeli-Jew assimilates to the dominant Israeli culture. Therefore, some argue that just like the hyphenated American-Jew is now becoming pure American, so is the hyphenated Israeli-Jew becoming pure Israeli.

The seeds for that movement were laid in the 1950's by a radical group of intellectuals called the Canaanites - with the establishment of Israel, they no longer view themselves as Jews, but only as Israeli. That group was marginalized in the patriotic and close-knit community of the time.

But what was radical and negligible in the 1950s has now gradually become more acceptable. A group of neo-Canaanites have developed in Israel in the 21st century. The presence of this group casts a greater shadow than their actual numbers, given their concentration in Tel Aviv, Israel's non-governmental centers of power and the media. Hence the shaping of a latent cold battle of narratives: Is Israel still the homeland for the Jews - or the homeland of the Israelis?

Notwithstanding its traditional military existential threats, this battle of narrative is likely to become Israel's primary front in its war of survival.

So Where is Zionism?

About 120 years ago, a group of 200 Jews from 17 countries got together in Basel, Switzerland at the first Zionist Congress, and began an audacious journey – gathering the Jews from their various Diaspora countries and resettling them back in Israel. This was met with fierce resistance, not just from outside forces, but primarily from within the Jewish community. Yet 60 years later, in 1948, that ambitious dream was turned into reality.

Another 60 years have passed, and once again Zionism is met with growing resistance, both from outside of Israel and increasingly from inside.

The themes that accompanied the early years collide with certain current Israeli realities. A feeling of “now what?” has emerged. Without addressing this and redefining Zionism, the original narrative might lose its battle with the strengthening post-Zionist narratives. An urgency emerges to craft Zionism 2.0.

Possible Mutual Solution

Jewish continuity faces an existential threat originating from both sides of the ocean. But a symbiotic mutual solution is possible.

Israel can become the new glue that binds together and preserves the new secular American Jewish community. American Jews must let Israel take center-stage in their identity. Replace the dying gefilte fish culture with the vibrant Israel. For this to happen, Israel must make some serious changes with respect to its relation with the Diaspora.

Israel must incorporate the Diaspora into Zionism 2.0. This would be a complete reversal from previous Israeli themes of “negating the Diaspora,” aggressively advocating aliya and seeking rapid “Israelization” of new-comers.

Israel must be prepared to become less “pure-Israeli” and more open to others. While preserving its distinctive, great culture, Israel should take account of the realities of the 21st

Century that have flattened communication and made the world more broadly standardized and accessible.

This is easier to do now than in the past: The Israeli and the Diaspora Jew have many more touchpoints in 2012 than they had two decades ago. Birthright not only enables young American Jews to visit Israel en masse, but also provides an opportunity for Israelis to interact with Americans. Similarly, the number of Israelis studying abroad has mushroomed, and the Israeli successful high-tech industry has led a large number of Israelis to routinely travel and immerse themselves in international business practices. Globalization and social networks allow the American and the Israeli to be much more in touch than they were prior to the 21st century.

In addition, Tel Aviv is advancing to become one of world's top cities for art, beaches, culture, bars and cafes. The city was recently rated #3 in Lonely Planet's top 10 Cities. Jerusalem's urban revival through investment in infrastructure and its increasing international population is turning it into a NGO and policy mecca - on top of it being the spiritual capital of the world.

Israel can leverage these two international cities to attract not just Jewish tourists and part-time residents, but non-Jews alike. Programs like Youth Ambassador Student Exchange (YASE), which have sent hundreds of non-Jewish High School students to Israel and visa-versa enables a greater grassroots connectivity between Americans as a whole and the people of Israel. Given the patterns discussed above, the more non-Jewish Americans that visit Israel, the easier it is for the American Jew to embrace Israel.

Recognizing that the world is increasingly moving to a “global cloud,” legacy issues of dual loyalty that deterred Jews from closeness to Israel in the 20th century should all but disappear. (For example, Boris Johnson, mayor of London and possible future contender for UK Prime Minister, was until recently an American Citizen).

Stronger ties between American Jews and Israel can add longevity to both Jewish societies. Moreover, it would reverse-transplant to Israel not just more Jewish tradition, but also American values and global professional standards.

In this way, some of the intermarriage dialogue that is so prevalent in the Jewish community could shift from being about American Jews marrying non-Jews, to being about American Jews marrying Israeli Jews.

The fork in the road provides a warning sign, but it also provides a rare opportunity to capitalize on the Golden Age in which Jews are currently living. Creating the right redefinitions to culture and religion could assure the symbiotic survival of both the secular American Jewish community and of the Jewish state of Israel.

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